



Transition for Students with Disabilities

How Parents Can Be Effective Advocates in the IEP Meeting

If you're a parent of one of the 5 million children with disabilities in the U.S., you're probably aware of the Individual Educational Plan (IEP) meeting. Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), parents of a child who receives special education services meet at least once a year with representatives of the local school district to prepare their child's IEP - a detailed, written description of the child's educational program.

You don't need to be a special education expert to be an effective advocate for your child in the IEP process. What you must do is be prepared and plan ahead. Every parent -- whether it's their first or their 15th IEP meeting - will benefit from reviewing these **10 Steps** in advance of the meeting.

Step 1: Understand your child's legal rights to special education.

Your school district is required by IDEA to give you copies of special education statutes, regulations and policies. Read these carefully. Keep in mind that under the law, parents are equal partners with school representatives in decision-making. You are just as important as everyone else at the IEP meeting!

Step 2: Obtain a copy of your school district's IEP form.

Become familiar with the sections you will be filling out at the IEP meeting, which typically include:

- *Program or Class* - the appropriate learning environment for your child, such as a regular classroom for all or part of the school day, a special class or a private school.
- *Goals and Objectives* - the general academic, linguistic, social, communication, vocational, cognitive, self-help and other goals you have for your child, such as reading or math skills, healthy peer relationships or independent living skills, plus the specific steps your child will have to take to reach these goals.
- *Related Services* - developmental, corrective and other services necessary to support your child's placement in a regular class or to allow your child to benefit from special education. Examples include a one-to-one aide in the classroom, speech therapy, or transportation to and from school.
- *Transition Services* - the services for children age 14 and older that will help them meet postsecondary goals in the areas of education or training, employment, and independent living. Transition services for students who are 14 and 15 differ than those for students who are 16 and older.
- *Other Educational Components* - anything else your child needs to succeed, such as particular teaching methods.

Step 3: Become an expert about your child's educational performance and needs.

Keep in regular contact with your child's teacher and other school representatives, and gather opinions from professionals who know your child. Get copies of everything in your child's school file, including assessments, testing data and written comments from teachers. Figure out what each item means and think about whether you can use it to demonstrate your child's need for a particular program or service.

Step 4: Know your options.

Gather information about various programs and services within your school district (as well as those outside of it) that may be appropriate for your child. Talk to your child's teacher, professionals who have evaluated your child, the district special education administrator, and other parents. Visit as many of these programs as you can before the IEP meeting.

Step 5: Develop your child's ideal IEP.

While you and the school district will develop the IEP together, it's a good idea for you to put together a blueprint of the educational program and services you want beforehand. This will not only help you learn your material, but it will also help you think about how to demonstrate that your child needs the educational help you want for him or her.

If your child has special health care needs, some items to consider are:

- Physical education program accommodations
- Classroom seating, such as avoiding being next to windows because of allergies or noise
- Accessibility, such as entrances, school activity areas, transportation, emergency evacuation
- Stamina and strength issues, such as carrying heavy books, scheduling classes
- Medication, medical supplies, and equipment

If your child is transition age (14 years or older), he or she should participate in the meeting, if possible. Some other items to consider include:

- Self-determination and self-advocacy skills
- Understanding own needs and required accommodations
- Health care management skills, self-care, and knowledge of health insurance
- Vocational training that won't conflict with health needs

It may be helpful to share your draft IEP with the school several days before the IEP meeting, and request that they share their draft with you.

Step 6: Gather all available information that supports your position and your child's ideal IEP.

This may be a statement from your child's teacher, an independent assessment of your child (an evaluation by someone outside the school district) or a statement from your child's pediatrician or other professional

Step 7: Find out who will attend the IEP meeting on behalf of the school district.

Try to find out who will be attending the meeting and what programs or services the school district might propose for your child. Typically, your child's teacher and the school administrator responsible for special education and specialists will attend the IEP meeting.

Step 8: Invite appropriate experts to speak at the IEP meeting on your child's behalf.

This may be your child's physician, an independent evaluator who's assessed your child, or a specialist who supports the program or service you want for your child. If key people can't attend - or it's too costly for them to do so - have them prepare a written statement for you to read at the meeting.

Step 9: Organize your materials.

Put all your papers and documents in a three-ring binder, with clearly labeled sections you can easily access at the meeting. Pre-planning and good organizational skills will help you to provide meaningful information.

Step 10: Explore additional resources that might help your child.

There are many resources available to help you better understand IEPs and support your child – and to empower your child to become a strong self-advocate! Advocacy groups and disability organizations can help tremendously in the process. Here are some materials and web sites to explore:

- Advocating for Yourself in School (for middle and high school students)
www.floridahats.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/03/School_Advocacy.pdf
- Wrights Law
www.wrightslaw.com/info/iep.index.htm
- Embedding Health Outcomes in the IEP Process
<http://dpimedia.wi.gov/main/Viewer/?peid=f44dfa70439241dd85e99cce0cb70e26>
- Navigating Your IEP: Are You on the Right Track towards Your Future?
www.familycafe.net/images/stories/pdffiles/navigating%20your%20iep%202-25-10.pdf
- Florida Department of Education, Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Services
www.fldoe.org/ese/pdf/Transition.pdf
- Project 10: Transition Education Network
www.project10.info/DetailPage.php?MainPageID=90&PageCategory=Transition%20Topic%20Areas&PageSubCategory=Health

Reference: *National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities*, <http://nichcy.org/disability>